Canada is short on clean energy; New report urges more spending on green production

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Body

Highlighting the need for a massive expansion of clean electricity over the next 28 years, a new report urges the federal government to quickly set up new rules to push fossil fuels out of Canada's power grids and funnel more money to energy sources that don't cause climate change.

According to the report published Wednesday by the think tank Clean Energy Canada, the country needs to roughly double the amount of clean electricity it produces to fulfil the government's goal to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to "net zero" before 2050.

That means adding electricity from clean sources equivalent to almost 12 times the output of Ontario's Bruce nuclear power plant, or 113 times the output of the Site C dam on the Peace River in northeast British Columbia.

The report does not put a price tag on the cost, but says it will require "significant" spending from governments and electricity providers, as well as swift action from Ottawa on the promised "clean electricity standard."

The governing Liberals made the standard a key pledge on climate change in this year's federal election, vowing to pass regulations to make Canada's electricity grids run entirely on non-emitting sources of power by 2035.

Mark Zacharias, aspecial adviser with Clean Energy Canada, said it is "critical" for Ottawa to set these regulations before the end of 2023. That would send a clear signal to utilities and provincial governments about what is required on the path to achieving 100 per cent non-emitting electricity, he said.

It would also make clear that the era of powering grids by burning fossil fuels is coming to a close.

"There's no use establishing or standing up new fossil fuel electricity generation, because you're not going to be able to use it in 15 years, so that's quite critical right now," Zacharias said by phone this week.

In a recent interview with the Star, Environment Minister Steven Guilbeault said the government would launch consultations on the new electricity rules "in the coming months" and work to implement them "as fast as we can."

The Clean Energy Canada report also bills the switch spurred by this promised regulation as a "generational opportunity" for jobs and climate action.

Clean Energy Canada predicts more than 200,000 jobs can be created in the clean energy sector by 2030. The report points to other potential economic advantages of cleaning Canada's electricity grids.

The European Union is already mulling tariffs on products associated with higher greenhouse gases, so if Canada's heavy industry can use cleaner electricity to make goods like steel and cement, they could get prioritized over dirtier alternatives from other countries, the report says.

The United States is also pushing for a non-emitting grid by 2035. Since the majority of U.S. electricity is still from emitting sources like coal and natural gas, the report says that opens the door for Canada to sell more clean electricity south of the border.

"Canada has a tremendous economic opportunity, not just a climate opportunity, to leverage our ability to create clean electricity," Zacharias said. "We need to seize it."

Eighty-three per cent of Canada's electricity grid is already powered by non-emitting sources. Sixty per cent is from hydro projects like dams, while 17 per cent is from nuclear power and six per cent comes from wind, the report notes, citing 2020 data from Statistics Canada.

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